Online educator Udacity offers self-driving car degree

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Sebastian Thrun, co-founder of online eduction startup Udacity says a new degree in engineering autonomous vehicles will include building a self-driving car and putting students' software to the test on San Francisco roads

Online education startup Udacity, co-founded by a man referred to in Silicon Valley as the father of self-driving cars, on Tuesday began offering a degree in engineering autonomous vehicles.

Sebastian Thrun said during an on-stage chat at TechCrunch Disrupt that the program would include building a self-driving car and putting students' software to the test on San Francisco streets.

"We will build a crowd-sourced, open-source self-driving car and it will be on the streets of San Francisco," Thrun said at the technology industry event here.

"If you see a car go by that has the Udacity logo, run as fast as you can the other way just to be safe," he quipped.

Thrun's background includes having founded the Google X lab known for tackling big-vision "moonshots" including self-driving cars and Google Glass internet-linked eyewear.

He and others launched for-profit education website Udacity in 2012.

"I was working on all these wonderful technologies, then I realized there were only a small number of engineers doing this stuff," Thrun said of his decision to shift from Google X to Udacity.

"I decided to make it possible for others to do these things. I felt, if we could build a new kind of university, we could have a bigger impact on the world than just building a self-driving car."

Udacity specializes in skills needed in new areas of technology innovation, and offers 'Nanodegrees' to boost credentials in the job market.

Udacity began taking applications at its website Tuesday for a self-driving car engineer program that takes nine months to complete, and consists of three terms that each cost $800.

The first class in the course was to get under way mid-October.

Topics covered will include deep learning, computer vision, automotive hardware, and sensors, according to the website.

Udacity partners in the endeavor include German auto giant Mercedes-Benz; California chip maker Nvidia and Otto.

US ride-sharing service Uber last month announced it had acquired commercial transport-focused tech startup Otto as the company presses ahead with its pursuit of self-driving technology.

The announcement came as the company also announced a $300 million effort with the Sweden-based automaker Volvo Cars to develop driverless cars.

"Autonomous cars have become one of the hottest areas for innovation," Thrun said in a blog post.

"Technology companies, automotive manufacturers, media giants, and start-ups around the world are rapidly pushing new advances in this space, whether it be hardware or software."

He cited a Boston Consulting Group estimate that the market for autonomous cars will hit $42 billion in 2025.

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